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## Spectacular Spaces of Consumption

Ellen G. Watkins

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, [ewatki12@students.kennesaw.edu](mailto:ewatki12@students.kennesaw.edu)

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## Spectacular Spaces of Consumption

Grace Watkins and Sarah W. Holmes (Faculty Advisor)  
Kennesaw State University

### ABSTRACT

Many pre-professional dance studios have become consumer driven in response to the growing economic practice of neoliberalism. Neoliberal values have become more prominent in today's economy and inevitably seeped into the lives of dancers and instructors, creating consumer based pre-professional training schools. This paper argues that the current neoliberal state of the United States is negatively affecting dance education by reducing specialized and therapeutic training and as a result numbing the creative mind and the artist's entrepreneurial abilities. This research begins with the basic definition of neoliberalism and discusses how the theory of *homo politicus* and *homo economicus* individuals are responsible for the recent development of what could be called the "superstore" dance school. The "superstore" dance school is a one-stop shop that offers many different styles of dance including combo classes and does not focus on a central technique. The immense disadvantages of the "superstore" approach to dance education lead to the project's examination of the pedagogies of dance in Israel, where dance is thriving. The project discusses both the United States' and Israel's economies and school systems in relation to teaching styles. It studies the differences in pedagogies and theorizes why they vary in approach regarding each country's economies. Once determined differences are established, the project will propose a solution through a marketable lesson plan that offers pedagogical techniques and approaches similar to those found in Israel that negate the neoliberal economy and its effects on education.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, dance education, Israeli education, artistry

Can a piano student with no technical knowledge of music theory invent his or her own melody? Typically, the greatest sonatas stem from the immense existing knowledge of the artist and their innovation upon those techniques. Some of the most famous football players are known for their namesake plays that they invented and derived from their expertise in the field of football plays. These men are applying what they have learned over many years and molding it into a shape or pattern never seen before. The theory that artistry and invention build upon an individual's extent of knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of a technique, in order to create something original and individualistic, is applicable to

all individuals in all fields. This project will adopt that theory and apply it to the field of dance. I will examine how the theory effects students, parents, and teachers in light of the current economy. I argue that neoliberalism in the United States, typically valuing quantity over quality, is negatively effecting dance education by reducing specialized and therapeutic training and as a result numbing the creative mind and the artist's entrepreneurial abilities. Finally, by exploring the theory of neoliberalism and researching its adverse effects through an interview with a dance school owner and director, I will propose a solution through the analysis and incorporation of the Israeli model of education.

Neoliberalism began around the world in the late 1970's (Harvey 2). It is a capitalistic theory suggesting that people will benefit most from the pursuit of their own individual objectives. In effect, neoliberalism has created the conditions for capital accumulation to benefit the elites (Harvey 19). In an ideal world, there would be no government interference in any public or private commerce. It supports the deregulation of government and the installment of self-assessment. Neoliberalism values the idea of "hands off" government across all forms of public life. Jobs, healthcare, markets, and education are only a few public services neoliberalism seeks to privatize. It values consumerism over citizenship (Harvey 2-3). While a free market has benefits, such as "reducing the opportunity for corruption" and helping individuals "improve their standard of living," applying unrestricted capitalism to all forms of public life, like neoliberalism suggests, can have many negative effects (Froning 3, 6).

*A Brief History Of Neoliberalism* sheds light on these negative aspects of neoliberalism. Author David Harvey points out that there is a side to neoliberalism that focuses on the "utopian" ideas of the theory and its efforts to "re-establish...capital accumulation" and "revitalize global capital accumulation" (Harvey 19). He then argues that this optimistic view does little other than justify its mean as a "larger project" in "restoring the power in an economic elite" (Harvey 19). Similarly, *Undoing The Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, echoes this argument in an individualistic approach. According to author Wendy Brown, there are two types of citizens in a society; the first is *homo politicus*. These are citizens who are interested in the greater good of a society and are "active participants" (Evans 1). *Homo economicus* is the second. They are

individuals who pursue their own interests. Brown argues that neoliberalism "...configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo economicus*" (Brown 31). Individuals, whether or not they are rooted in attempting to be *homo politicus* or not, are concerned with being products of the economy and their own ambitions. Brown and Harvey's arguments conclude that, no matter where their "utopian" intentions lie, individuals will eventually either "abandon" their beliefs or "twist" their principles to justify their actions (Harvey 19).

The economy can have an immense amount of influence on dance education. Neoliberal values have become increasingly prominent in today's economy because of the monetary benefits offered to dance studio owners. Neoliberalism has seeped into the lives of dancers and instructors creating a consumer-based, pre-professional training school. The following conversation between myself, a dance instructor, and experienced twenty-year veteran studio owner Dana Crain, demonstrates the current mentality of studio owners:

AUTHOR: "Do you feel like your dance school has changed over the years due to the economy, and, if so, do you feel your teaching methods have changed because of it?"

DANA CRAIN: "Yes, definitely. We tried for many years to offer only traditional ballet classes but it became necessary to add a variety of classes to appeal to a wider range of people. Traditionally, ballet was taught as a slow progression, taking years to develop a technical dancer. Today,

many students wish to only take one ballet class a week for fun instead of continuously training in the art” (Crain).

AUTHOR: “Do you feel like, inevitably, the school is consumer driven?”

DANA CRAIN: (With an almost grim frown) “Good question. No, because we offer traditional technique classes to those students who want to pursue a serious dance career. But also, yes, because we have had to shorten our hours, raise our prices, and entertain the parents and the community. We have also spent a copious amount of money moving studios several times to maintain a location that is convenient to many neighboring communities” (Crain).

The choice between being artistically independent and economically efficient is common for studio owners. The economic pressure expressed by school administrators like Crain links neoliberalism with the recent development of what I call the “superstore” dance school.

The “superstore” dance school is a one-stop shop offering many different styles of dance, including combo classes, and does not focus on a central technique. They are located near mostly urban areas and established around middle-class neighborhoods. Students attend these “superstore” dance schools for recreational purposes, physical activity, and pre-professional training. These students learn the rudiments of several different techniques,

and forgo technical depth in any particular style. The “combo” classes that “superstore” studios provide satisfy consumer demands and lower production costs. This recent trend in combo classes stems from parents’ desire to enroll their children in a class such as a ballet/tap, or a tap/jazz class. As uninformed consumers, parents believe they are getting more value, when in reality the student is learning less of each technique. Combo-classes may be beneficial in introducing young children or beginners to different dance styles, but they are also fraught with disincentives to learn. Over time, combo classes have wriggled their way into “superstore” schools’ curricula. One example of this wriggling is demonstrated by Crain when explaining the appearance of combo classes at her longstanding school.

AUTHOR: “Do you feel like you are constantly appealing to the parent instead of the student? If so, in what ways?”

DANA CRAIN: (After a long sigh) “In our thirty years, we tried to avoid combo classes. Yet, we have had to offer those courses but with technical excellence through our teachers” (Crain).

The drawbacks of combo classes are multifold. Instead of learning how to think independently, students rely on the teacher for constant stimulation on how to execute their steps through proper technique. Technique cannot be undermined, it is the foundation upon which the art form is achieved. Advancement in the art, artistic ability, improvisation, and invention all stem from the root of technique. When a student lacks technique, many of the other creative aspects of their dance can be lost. In short, combination classes inhibit dancers from utilizing their own creative minds to develop

identity and artistry through technique. The more a student understands and is able to execute the essentials of each technique they choose to learn, the more it enables them to become their own artists. In many ways, this structure of education is untraditional and differs from preceding practices.

The “pre-neoliberal” structure of a professional Ballet Company does not reflect the structure of today’s “superstore” dance school. In a ballet company, there was frequently an important figure known as the ballet mistress or master.<sup>1</sup> This individual must have “a detailed knowledge of classical repertoire,” and “a proven track record in teaching” (Slavin 3). The mistress or master had a specific goal; to “coach students and ensure their smooth integration into productions” (Slavin 2). The professional companies were specialized and direct in purpose. Their goal was to train apprentices to become well-developed classical ballet dancers and eventually company members. Today, this ballet mistress is rarely found among pre-professional schools. This model of schooling is not employed by the directors of the “superstore” dance schools and is mainly seen in Ballet Academies, Professional Companies, and School systems who regulate their students’ progress through curriculums and syllabi. Today’s model of education does not put the student at the center of its curriculum, but instead caters only to the consumer.

Henry A. Giroux, one of the founding theorists of critical pedagogy in the United States, argues that schools claiming to be of “higher education” are merely “spectacular spaces of consumption” for greedy customers (Giroux 8). He argues that the role of an educator is consumer-driven stating,

“neoliberalism defines the citizen as a consumer, schooling as an act of consumption, faculty as entrepreneurs, and students as customers” (Giroux 10). This theory of modern education reflects the way modern dance instructors are viewed in relation to neoliberalism and the economy. Since the neoliberal economy places extreme emphasis on consumerism, the educator or dance instructor has no choice but to sell what the consumer desires. While Giroux calls educators entrepreneurs, they can only create what the consumers desire. Parents are the main consumers in a pre-professional ballet school; therefore, the teachers are subject to their demands. By allowing parents to influence what educators teach, a lack of creative thinking and informed invention exists in the schools. In a sense, the educators’ job does not exist outside of the consumers’ demand. And as Brown theorizes, whether or not a teacher is a *homo politicus* individual, if unable to offer a variety of teaching techniques, the job is lost (Brown 31).

The neoliberal market theory privileges quantity over quality, by encouraging businesses to lower overhead costs of production, or in this case, labor. This model does not promote hiring many specialized instructors, such as a mistress or master, jazz specialist, hip-hop specialist, or specialist in codified techniques of modern dance. Instead, the theory affirms few employees can teach the basics of many ranging techniques. The ultimate result of such theorizing encourages a few generalized employees instead of several specialized educators, or in other words employee reduction. Fewer and de-specialized employees lessens the probability of increasing students’ creativity and kinetic

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier term for female and male dance instructors

connectivity, components central to creative artists. In conversation with Crain about the focus of instructors at her school, it is noted that the creative mind is an object of relevance for educators but, perhaps, not always a priority.

AUTHOR: “Is there a therapeutic aspect to your teaching of dance? In what ways do you strive to enable the students creative mind?”

DANA CRAIN: “In a way. I feel like I have influenced the children I teach as they grow up. I become a mentor in their life. As far as my teaching, it is very classical. You just can’t teach kids sensitivity and kinetic connections between the bodies. So much of dance is narcissistic, so we try to teach students their value as a person by understanding that there is something beyond the physicality of the art” (Crain).

Crain’s assessment of dance as “narcissistic” is an upsetting claim. Her assertion that one cannot “just” teach kids sensitivity exemplifies that most educators within the “superstore” dance schools do not bother with the more difficult aspects of the art, such as artistic sensitivity and kinetic connections. If this is in fact the case, why does this “superstore” dance school seem to be the only option for middle-class Americans? Understandably, not all instructors bend to the shape of the consumer.

An examination of the nation of Israel and their model of education, and a comparison of that model with our “neoliberal” model, reveals that their dance schooling centers around a unique teaching method that rejects the multifaceted American “superstore” system. It is called the “Therapeutic Body Signature” (Ophir 192).

Israel is a leading nation in the arts, especially in contemporary dance. When comparing American and Israeli pedagogical approaches, it is important to recognize the differences and similarities in the economies of the two countries. Both the United States and Israel seek to “privatize social services<sup>2</sup>” such as education and health care (Gutwein 7). Israel’s “neoliberal separation of society and economics” mirrors the individualistic “hands-off” government found in the neoliberal American marketplace (Gutwein 10).

One difference in the two economies stems from the evidence that the government of Israel supports the arts. Government officials, such as Culture Minister Miri Regev, are ready and willing to provide funding for the arts as long as the artist’s works do not “delegitimize the state of Israel” (Mitnick). Since there is support from the government, Israeli artists may feel more comfortable approaching dance pedagogy in the manner they desire. It is not as consumer-driven as the “superstore” schools found in America. The American consumer-driven mindset may stem from the lack of funding for the arts in America. Yet, organizations such as The National Endowment for the Arts, seek “to give Americans the

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<sup>2</sup> “The privatization movement is an international movement. Inside the United States, privatization has taken the form of deregulation and the shifting of government programs to the private sector” (Leech).

opportunity to participate in the arts, exercise their imaginations, and develop their creative capacities (“National Endowment for the Arts”). While there is an absence of definite funding for the arts in the United States, there are still ways to enhance the dancers’ and educators’ creative minds and produce citizen-supported art.

The success of Israeli artists in the United States testifies to the validity of Israeli pedagogies. *New York Times* reporter Janice Ross calls the work of Ka’et, a group of five Orthodox men working under the direction of a Tel Aviv choreographer, Ronen Izhaki, “emotionally rich” (Ross). She notes that their performances are followed by “cheering...sold out audiences” (Ross). Laruen Gallagher, of *The San Francisco Examiner*, calls Israel’s acclaimed Batsheva Dance Company “one of the world’s most exciting contemporary dance troupes” (Gallagher).

Israel is producing artists and entrepreneurs whose works “speak a new language...which crackles with electricity” (Gallagher). Recently, Atlanta hosted, *Exposed*, an event that featured several Israeli choreographers and dancers. The works presented “received standing ovations” (Alexander). From New York to San Francisco to Georgia, the art that Israeli pedagogies are producing is successful in the United States and “highly anticipated” by crowds (Alexander). Since the Israeli education system is producing dancers and choreographers that are successful, and would thrive in a neoliberal market, Americans can learn from their model of dance education.

The Israeli style of instruction, practiced through the Therapeutic Body Signature, is rooted in freedom of movement and invention for the educator and the

student. The Therapeutic Body Signature focuses on the mental and physical needs of the student and instructor.

### *The Therapeutic Body Signature*

The Creative Arts Therapies Training and Research Center at the University of Haifa, Israel, a multicultural and inclusive dance therapy program, employs the Therapeutic Body Signature. Attendees in the program are very different from each other, similar to the diversity found in America, but manage to work together and develop relationships. In Haifa, they also incorporate community outreach as a large part of their program. Students take what they learn from dance therapy class and visit neighborhood homes to share the benefits they have experienced, thus developing social interaction skills. “The experience of moving together to music during sessions offers support to participants and helps build coping skills necessary to deal with the depression, anxiety, and helplessness that are often seen in the Israeli population” (Capello 24). Intimacy, developed through dance, can have numerous positive outcomes for participants.

The social benefits of the Therapeutic Body Signature, proven through the program in Haifa, are applicable in the United States as well. Depression and anxiety are among the prominent disorders affecting Americans (Gurley). A curriculum that focuses on these needs, in conjunction with dance education, can be practiced in the “superstore” schools and could promote a radical shift in the environment of dancers and educators.

First, it is important to affirm that dance is beneficial and it enables the creative mind. After a twenty-one-year study examining the effects of physical and cognitive recreational activities on mental acuity, the *New England Journal of Medicine*

published an article that reported the influence of dance on the brain. While the study was originally intended for senior citizens, growing research has determined that dancing increases cognitive acuity at all ages. In “Dancing Makes You Smarter,” author and social dance instructor Richard Powers reports the results of a study that showed, after twenty-one years of monitoring participants’ brain activity, that the activity of dance had the highest percentage of mentally acute attendees. Since dancing integrates several brain functions at once, such as kinesthetic, rational, musical, and emotional functions, the result is an increase in the students’ neural connectivity, or brain activity. Dancing requires split-second, rapid-fire decision-making. This is different from rote memory, repeating the same routines or paths as one may in stationary cycling or lap swimming, or just physical memory, physical exercise that requires little thinking such as walking or running. Dance stimulates the creative mind by increasing the connectivity of your brain and generating the need for new pathways. New pathways encourage creative outlets for movement and choreographic patterns. Dancing keeps the brain alert and opens it to unexpected possibilities that, when acted upon, enable the creative mind to experiment and construct. As Powers states, intelligent dancing is a way of thinking that requires “a highly active attention to possibilities” (Powers 3). It is from these possibilities that original artistry and identity is spawned.

Following the discovery that dance does enable the creative mind, it is important to address what American “superstore” schools are doing that might inhibit the creative mind. Most often in the United States, creativity is separated from education and the learning process. Creativity and knowledge are seen as independent entities. However, in his article, “Creativity in

Education as a Question of Cultivating Sensuous Forces,” Lars Geer Hammershøj argues that the creative process aids in the learning process and problem-solving. There are several ways to incorporate creativity in the classroom. For example, educators can inspire imagination through storytelling by suggesting that students think outside the normal realm of thought and movement to transcend what has already been established. While there is advocacy for creativity through these techniques, there is not negation of factual knowledge. In fact, Hammershøj argues that, “without knowledge of what drives the process, it is difficult to foster creativity” (168). However, often in the United States, knowledge of a technique and ability is favored over the creative process and the two are not seen as equal in value. Art may be valued outside the classroom, but within the classroom, teachers may approach dance as if it is mathematics, and should only be repeated as demonstrated. Yet, when technique becomes robotic, dancers lose their artistry, and dancers without artistry are, in accordance, robotic. But, by incorporating creativity into the technical learning process of dance, educators can foster artistry through technique.

The Israeli model of education emphasizes the importance of artistry in dance beginning at an early age. In American early childhood education “playful body-based learning is often under-represented as a learning area by early childhood educators” (Deans 46). Artistry and improvisational skills can be developed through imaginative dance in younger students and help enable their learning process. Dance facilitates the learning process through “embodied thinking” and “multi-focal relating” (Deans 51). Students are challenged mentally through “multi-focal relating,” and embody those thoughts with creative movement



through “embodied thinking.” “Multi-focal relating” encourages dance students to develop their mental skills when making connections between movement and the cultural world. It can also help students discover their own self-identity, and learn how they relate to many other dancers worldwide. As author Deans states in his article “Thinking, Feeling and Relating: Young Children Learning through Dance” that dance enables participating children to engage in “embodied thinking, playful, imaginative problem solving and aesthetic decision making while developing, through multi-focal relating, a strong sense of self and collective agency” (Deans 56). Artistry, improvisation, and imaginative dance can be easily implemented into creative movement classes for young students at a “superstore” dance school. However, implementing improvisation and artistry with adolescent students requires a more strategic lesson plan.

Professor and researcher for the Kibbutzim College of Education in Tel Aviv, Israel, Einat Shuper Engelhard, recently performed a study focusing on adolescent dancers. Her research studied the emotional processes that take place during adolescence and occur in the psyche, mind, and the soma or body. After viewing a group of adolescents’ improvisations and reading their journals after their improvisational experience, Engelhard discovered that the adolescent body longs to express its urges and desires, but it is also vulnerable. During adolescence, the body is more comfortable with consistent techniques in the classroom (Engelhard 498). However, the adolescent body also desires to express itself through movement and writing. For this age group, the Israeli model of education suggests slowly implementing improvisational procedures through technique exercises. It introduces the unfamiliarity of expression with the security of a developed technique.

For example, after an educator demonstrates a combination and it is performed once by the group of adolescents, then artistry can be introduced through the use of imagery, storytelling, and personal experience. By asking the dancers to tell a story that is relevant to their daily lives, educators can combine the need for self-expression with technical development. This allows dancers to obtain a sense of ownership and identity while learning essential skills.

The importance of cultivating artistry within the classroom is not emphasized in “superstore” dance schools. Artistry is seen as inferior to technique; however, it is artistry that embellishes technique. While the Israeli model of education currently implements this concept of improvised artistry, there are American authors and choreographers researching it as well. In her article, “Fostering Agency and Artistry in Dancers” professor and performer Amy Chavasse argues that “teaching dance is a matter of fostering artistic capacity but more importantly, it is a matter of fostering artistic agency and artistry in dancers” (Chavasse 147). The concept that the learner must be at the core of the class and that they must take initiative to act upon their ideas is not completely new to American dance instruction, and bears comparison to American economic tendencies. Some economists might argue that entrepreneurship through artistry is the cornerstone of capitalism. Yet often within the dance community, artists find it difficult to diversify their body movements, since unfamiliar movement is difficult to measure in terms of its level of success because it is unrelated to any other form of movement.

Using classical or established vocabulary produces quantifiable results, whereas inventive, novel movement is “harder to validate” (Giguere 21). By

tethering the structure of established technique with innovation of movement in the classroom, successful artistry can be achieved. The relation between technique, artistry, improvisation, and invention is simple. Each one can exist without the other, but it is when they are assembled together, like building blocks, that they transcend their independence. Once a student has developed their technique, they begin discovering their identity through artistry and their movement is affected by their personality and experiences. Once a student is comfortable allowing their movement to be vulnerable and intimate, improvisation emerges to produce original and spontaneous actions. Through manipulation and practice the improvisation develops into the invention of specialized and exclusive movement sequences and patterns. A pedagogical approach that incorporates all of this can be established in the United States, however it is difficult within the current economic environment.

This style of instruction that focuses on the students' needs and artistry may be difficult to find in America because of the consumer-driven mindset of some parents. The individuality and independence that this style of teaching encourages, in reality, supports dancers because it connects the creative mind to the physical body. It encourages dancers to improvise upon their intuition and expand upon what they know. And, as seen through the Israeli model of education, it produces successful choreographers who are challenging contemporary approaches to movement. Yet in America, we do not "give priority to the physical and mental needs of...both teacher

and students" (Ophir 194). This results in a lack of resourceful dancers.

One solution for the lack of resourceful dancers can be found in a lesson plan<sup>3</sup> that guides the educator through a strategic class for "superstore" dance schools to advocate technique, artistry, doses of improvisation, and eventually invention. It is a marketable lesson plan that could easily be integrated into existing classrooms throughout America. It focuses on specialized technique and mental stability, as well as a slow introduction to personalized movement through artistry and improvisation. This training would produce technical dancers with the ability to think creatively and discover contemporary approaches to movement and choreography. It is important that the educators implementing this lesson plan must facilitate a safe learning environment for students to explore their artistry. The educator must "focus on the needs, abilities, imagination, and creativity of the people" (Ophir 195). In such classrooms, participants of dance are granted attention that helps them develop their technique, grow in their artistry, and increase their independence as a movement inventor.

Mark Franko, featured speaker at the "Dancing Economies Conference, argues against the theory that "productivity requires expediency" (Franko 87). Expediency, being a tactic choreographers can use to be successful, derives from convenience and practicality. But what if choreographers strived to explore their own original ideas in ways not yet witnessed? Expediency can discourage radical shifts in the way artists

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<sup>3</sup> This lesson plan is developed and created by Grace Watkins. It exists in the format of a standard lesson plan with additional

remarks and examples for how to best incorporate and improve technique, artistry, improvisation, and invention of choreography.

invent and move because it anchors them to what has already been established as “profitable” so that entrepreneurial abilities are lost and nothing new is created. Instead, creativity and choreography becomes a repeating pattern of existing repertoire. Still, the artist is fastened to the economy they exist in as Mark Franko notes, “if we inhabit the web of neoliberal capitalism, we must move around spaces that have incentives, derivatives, and opportunity costs” (Franko 88). Educators must be able to succeed in the current economy where consumers dictate their creativity while at the same time teaching what is necessary for their students to thrive. The proposed lesson plan allows teachers to continue to develop strong technical dancers that consumers desire, while preparing them for a career, through artistry and improvisation. It can be implemented in any class, but is especially successful in modern and contemporary classes.

In conclusion, the economy can have an immense amount influence on education. It is currently encouraging consumers to believe that dance training is merely an act of consumption. As a result, there is a lack of qualified and specialized instructors, inventive educators, and successful student artists. Within the United States there is an absence of dancers who are mentally artistic, as well as technically advanced. Have American dancers lost their entrepreneurial abilities as a result of multi-faceted, de-specialized, and consumer-rooted dance education? Economists such as Adam Smith and Joseph A. Schumpeter argue that “entrepreneurial capitalism” and the inventive mind are the “cornerstone of the economy” (Price). There are ways to prevent the loss of dancers’ entrepreneurial abilities and creative minds and equip dancers to succeed mentally, physically, and economically. Because it produces artists

who are successful in the American economy, offers specialized, therapeutic training that encourages technical excellence, artistry, and invention, if “superstore” schools practice the ideas found in the Israeli model of education, this loss of creativity can be avoided.

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